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Of Printmaking, Creativity and Studio Practice: A Dialogue with Malcolm Christian, Caversham Press

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Abstract

Malcolm Christian is a 67-year old South African who grew up in Durban (Natal, KwaZulu-Natal). His parentage was of the second, third generations from UK. He spent his first 24 years in South Africa doing his studies before going to London for one-year scholarship: On finishing school he completed a Diploma in Fine Art majoring in sculpture combined with a certificate in photography at the Natal College for Technical Education. He won an overseas scholarship which enabled him to study printmaking at Croydon College for Art and Design, London. After returning to South Africa he taught in a number of tertiary education institutions prior to taking a life-changing decision to go into practice, establishing a printmaking press (studio) which a wide-range of artists have continued to leverage upon. His press at the 'lonely' midland of Caversham in KwaZulu-Natal has remained a huge facility of a studio, first of its kind in South Africa, established in 1985. Malcolm has, by his collaborative engagement at Caversham studio, grounded a creative osmosis between formal institutions of art and professional practitioners. This he does by admitting artists for residences, organising workshops for young learners. This creative initiative has also budded into brilliant strands such as the Caversham Centre for Artists and Writers, CreACTive Centres and the entrepreneurial model for hand-made fabric printing and workshop, the Caversham Textile. Malcolm's approach is an excellent paradigm for today's artists and professional producers of creative culture. Kathy Arbuckle of University of KwaZulu-Natal convivially referred to him as a 'Picasso'. I sat down with him in April 2018 to dialogue in details.



Figure 1: Some University students rounding off a 3-day workshop with Malcolm Christian at Caversham press, 2018

Source: Photograph by the author

I see as a fulfilled printmaker-artist. What inspired you to go into printmaking?

It was by accident. I won a scholarship and went to England to study sculpture and filmmaking; I had done a diploma in sculpture and a certificate in photography and thought it would be interesting to explore the integration of these two disciplines. However, on arrival in London I was disappointed with the course offered and applied to join the postgraduate printmaking programme. Even though I had little experience in printmaking they agreed, this resulted in my spending the year working in the etching department. On returning to South Africa all my teaching posts were in the field of printmaking.

Coming from a different cultural background, do you think the African environment here has influenced your making of art and how?

I think it has. I think it is one those understanding that you gain with life experiences; from the diversity of family background to our education and individual life experiences, all underpins our evolving understanding and ability to contribute. As one grows and creates, it marks a journey of unveiling of these diverse influences which are often part of a subliminal process.

My great grand parents came out to South Africa from England and Scotland. All my own experiences until I was 24 and went to study in London were solely South African. I recognise that so much of what I am and have achieved is through the privilege of growing up here as a white South African. Looking back, my adult and professional life as educator and collaborator has been guided by a humanist concern (ubuntu), not built on exclusion and privilege but in searching for ways to recognize, affirm and help others many of who don't have opportunity. So, you know part of me is African. Part of me aspires to the tradition of printmaking and where

that has actually come from, and part of me is recognizing the value of education. This resulted finally in the founding of the Caversham Press thirty-three years ago. The Caversham Press recognises the long history and traditions of printmaking combined with the value of education in the many forms it takes.

Prior to establishing the Caversham Press, I lectured from 1975 -84 in a number of tertiary education institutions and ended up at Wits University for 4 years. It was here that I recognised that I was uncomfortable within an academic environment due to the existing exclusion and—I don't know whether one will say—the competitive nature of it and that my strength lay in a complementary collaboration on a one-on-one-basis. And as time went by, I realised that the reason for my passion for printmaking was because it is the ideal medium for collaboration. It is process- driven with specific starting points and conclusions followed by pauses that allows for other intervention. If I remained as a sculptor or a photographer, or a painter or in any other medium, my life would have been a solitary journey.

When I set up the Caversham Press, I had made the decision it wasn't for doing my own work but as a facility for collaborating with others and enabling their visions to come to life. The need for this choice was based on my experience of resentment at trying to produce my own work in the university studio alongside students and the recurring interruption and requests for 'please can you help me? So, the focus at Caversham is not about me but the creative dialogue between me and the artists that work here.

To bring you back a bit, you said you lectured for about 10 years. Where was that?

On my return from England I taught part-time at Durban University of Technology (DUT), which was then known as the Natal College for Technical Education (NCATE); also, at M L Sultan College for Technical Education; and the Durban-Westville University, tertiary institution for Indian education. A year later I was appointed fulltime lecturer in Printmaking at the NCATE. Shortly after that I was approached by Natal University to run printmaking in the Department of Fine Art, Pietermaritzburg. I taught there from 1976 until the end of 1980. Professor Alan Crump, head of the Fine Arts Department at Wits University approached me to help them set up screen printing and lithography, as components of their newly offered major in printmaking. Pino Cattaneo, an Italian taught etching and between the two of us we designed the course. In 1984 I was asked to apply for a senior lecturer's post at the University of Cape Town after the resident printmaking lecturer had returned to Holland. It was at this time that I discovered the 'Caversham church,' so it was a toss-up between continuing within the academia and having a nice comfortable life or buying this derelict Methodist church and graveyard and establishing the first independent professional printmaking studio.

What is your major aspect of focus as a printmaker?

My first love is etching. I loved the intaglio process. I tried to actually think whether it was just purely from the romance of studying it in London, but it has to do with its materiality. I think this is why I chose sculpture in the beginning, because of its tactility. In etching, similarly, you're working with a metal plate, covering it with wax ground, immersing in a mordant, hand-wiping stiff ink into the lines, soaking paper that allows the image to be imprinted onto it. However, in setting up the studio and even though countless etching editions have been produced, screen-printing became the dominant medium due to its versatility in scale and colour printing.

How were you able to build this expansive outfit of printmaking machinery at Caversham studio?

It developed over three decades. When I began, I wanted to emulate a facility similar to that found in an education institution with all the main print mediums and allowing for multimedia exploration but all I had was a small etching press and screen-printing equipment from Johannesburg.

My first commission, which really gave me the courage to set up the studio, was when I was approached by Christopher Till, the Director of Johannesburg Art Gallery to produce a portfolio in an edition of 100 to celebrate the gallery's centenary. This meant choosing a medium that enabled the creation of an edition of that size, plus the fact that in working with five South African artists they would want to work not only in monochrome but also in colour. So, screen printing was the only medium available to me. From then on, as projects and artists required, new pieces of equipment were acquired.

I see you as a versatile artist, attending to works in details. How did you develop all these varied skills?

I think my approach is different from a traditional printmaker. I think that is the value or the difference that I bring to my approach. If you are working in a specialist printmaking workshop, with a master lithographer or master etcher, they know every nuance, all that there is to know about that particular technique. I never consider myself as a master printer. When working with an artist it's about the artist's content, about the creative dialogue that happens and the development of the visual language required for that particular print. So, every time, it is almost like inventing the language afresh. I think this is what has kept my interest going over all these years, a love for inventiveness based in purpose and meaning. It is not a matter of opening a manual but discovering a process that you are able to work with here in Africa rather than appertaining to levels of sophistication in Europe and America. So, you've got to be constantly questioning, exploring, inventing because you do not have ease of access to materials or knowledge. Now of course you have the internet.

Can you talk about your projects and programmes in Caversham Press?

The initial idea was that it would be an open access studio offering editioning facilities to artists from all backgrounds. At the start these were those with whom I had taught, encouraging those friends and colleagues to come down and stay at Caversham and produce works for their exhibitions. Because of its locality, this meant that Caversham became a residential facility as well as a print studio. In the beginning we would move the children out of their bedrooms into ours so artists could stay there. Ros would cook all the meals. I would work as a production printmaker for them. So, in other ways I would create the plates, print and edition them, and the artists would take the prints away and sell them as part of their exhibition.

It was awhile before I would create my own projects as printer and publisher. With my deep-seated commitment to education, in 1988 I started running programmes for artists from disadvantaged backgrounds and in 1990 we were invited to the National Art Festival at Grahams town to exhibit "Five Years at the Caversham Press" which included the works of professional artists and young emerging talent. We had never exhibited before then. So, we were then putting together almost an array of what we have done over the last five years and that really started the whole idea of project. As the demand grew for the education programmes we increased the number of print workshops that we ran. All funding initially was provided by

Ros and myself and as this was limited in 1993, we decided to establish a not-for-profit trust Caversham Press Educational Trust to enable us to apply for funding. Trust programmes included bookbinding and the whole array of printmaking such as etching, stone lithography, screen printing and relief prints and resulted in a number of national exhibitions. Out of those projects we developed institutional identity in some ways.



Figure 2: Malcolm Christian, in his Caversham Press demonstrating one-on-one to students during a workshop. Photo: Trevor Morgan, 2018

Source: Photograph by the author

What do you consider the most outstanding feat and challenges of your printmaking journey?

I wouldn't call them outstanding achievements but gifts that I have received from working with so many artists from a wide variety of backgrounds that have resulted in my own growth and development through collaboration.

All told, over the 33 years I have worked with in excess of 300 artists producing over 1000 editions. These were from all areas and stages of their professional development, from emergent to artists of international renown such William Kentridge. We produced the majority of William's prints from 1987 to 1998 and have continued to work with him to the present.

In retrospect it was just by chance, circumstance and good fortune that we happened to be the first independent comprehensive printmaking studio in South Africa that enabled us to create what The Caversham Press became.

So how do you think have influenced the creative space in South Africa being about the only known press of this magnitude?

I wouldn't have the presumption to say that we inspired other presses—but certainly other presses were started. You have Mark Attwood's Artists' Press and Kim Berman founding the Artist Proof Studio in the early 1990s. Kim came back from Boston where she had been studying for her Master's degree and Mark came from a commercial printing background and then completed the Master Printers programme at the Tamarind Institute for Lithography in

USA. And they returning to South Africa, set up a lithographic studio at the Bag Factory in Johannesburg. It is encouraging now to see so many new printmaking facilities throughout the country.

As to contributing to the creative space, I think beyond the production space for artists, what I did is provide a space that allowed osmosis to occur between the formal educational institutions and independent professional institutions. In a similar way to what you are doing here at the moment, coming from studying at University of KwaZulu-Natal and coming to Caversham to experience another facet and approach to printmaking. The difference is that here at the professional press the sole focus is on creating images.

By committing oneself to creating independent spaces in South Africa like anywhere in the world, one is supporting, nurturing and in a fundamental way affirming the importance of creativity in our country. By investing all your skills and resources in providing a quiet focused space for others to come and work provides a bridge between what we study and aspire to and how we apply this in our life's journey

What are your plans to maintain continuity of your creative legacy?

That is remarkably difficult and something that I have been wrestling with since 2012, when funding stopped for Caversham Centre for Artists and Writers.

In 2000 I established Caversham Centre as a non-profit 21A structure with the intention that this would be the vehicle of Caversham legacy. It had a board of 14 directors and members that comprised both international and national figures of standing like Harriet Sanford from the NEA—the National Educational Association of Washington, John Samuel who was the CE of Nelson Mandela Foundation at the time and an array of well-known local Artists such as David Koloane, and would raise funding and an endowment to allow a continuity of access and facility into the future.

But with the financial collapse in 2008, funding became more and more difficult to obtain and by 2012 everything stopped. I tried on a personal level to continue for the next five years much reduced whilst wrestling with the legacy question, how to use and share—not just knowledge, but also the facilities with others. And I think that has been a challenge. Does one donate equipment to fine arts departments or to individual initiatives? How do you determine sustainability and longevity and how important is this in terms of the growing notion of South Africa as a developing culture and country—and the importance of arts? I'm not sure.

What is your advice towards making printmaking a career, especially for young learners?

With the massive growth in digital arts these are avenues for young learners but when it comes to traditional original prints the challenge is the need of access to a facility with the means to create these, that is, presses which are heavy and bulky along with all the other accompanying materials and technology. If you are a painter or sculptor, you still need studio space but these seem easier to establish for oneself than in printmaking.

This was in part why in 2006 we developed a programme in partnership with Centre for Visual Arts at KZN called the *Gabisa Ndlela CreACTIVE Centre*. Since 2002 we had been establishing a network of community art initiatives called CreACTIVE Centres. These offered arts programmes run by members of the community who had undertaken the Caversham leadership programme called the Hourglass Process.

Gabisa Ndlela was run by Gabisile Nkosi, Caversham Centre outreach director and Vuli Nyoni, lecturer in printmaking and with the idea to open the university facilities to artists from community background, so they could come in over weekends and holidays when we would run projects for them.

If you do not have access, you work with simpler processes such as relief printing and I think this is why relief prints are such a dominant medium when you look at the history of exclusion in South Africa. These are prints that you are able to do on your kitchen table. Take a piece of lino that you can cut and print it with a spoon. Now days, these primary printmaking techniques can offer the inclusion of digital printed elements as well.

Anything beyond that requires infrastructure and these rest predominantly either in departments of educational institutions or private presses. The problem with private presses is sometimes the locality makes them difficult to get to for a day at a time and running these without subsidy is costly. So, unless you have an established market for your prints which allows you to pay for use of these facilities they become out of the reach of many emerging artists.

How do you see the entrepreneurial prospect of printmaking?

I guess entrepreneurship is taking your personal passion and vision and translating this into commercial currency. It is this combination that will support and enable you to continue on this exciting and challenging journey.

Recently somebody who is about to start a lithographic workshop in Somerset West asked me 'do you have any advice for me?' My response would be to develop a relevant marketing structure, gallery and internet base from the outset. I know that is a little like the chicken and egg situation but the only way to survive is by promoting and selling prints and in an era of networking this has become much more attainable.

At the time of starting Caversham Press the challenge for me was working with artists that didn't have established professional careers; and that there was little or no market for original prints in South Africa. Unless you have a market, you carry enormous financial risk. We have 100s of edition which we will never sell but these still provide the gratification of having given an experience from which artists have benefited.

The entrepreneurship in the arts is a double-edged sword. On one hand you are creating based on personal content and expression. If looking to its saleability, you become governed by what the market requires and often lose elements of uniqueness and personal relevance. So, there is a need for balance between what is accessible commercially and that which you want to communicate through art. In today's world authenticity is becoming increasingly sought after. Be true to yourself.

Do you have any other information?

I don't think so other than to trust your instincts and grasp all opportunities that come your way with wisdom, courage and energy. When you look back you will be as amazed as I in trying to work out "How did I end up here?" How could I be so lucky? If I trace the steps that made me buy a derelict church and graveyard in the beginning and who in their right mind would bring up their kids living in a graveyard? Not many people. Out of that grew the Caversham Press and its facilities.

It has so much to do with luck, so much to do with listening to one's instinct rather than solely depending on intellect and committing to that which you are passionate about. I think passion

is an indispensable element in any successful artist, because passion allows us to tap into the limitless potentials of ourselves. It allows us to forget about the two limitations that we very often used to create barriers within our lives, oneself and time. In the end, we all will be constantly amazed at the journey undertaken and the destinations achieved.



Figure 3: Part of the expansive studio at Caverham press for hand-made fabric printing and workshop

Source: Photograph by the author